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SUBJECT: FARC RELEASES ADDITIONAL HOSTAGES IN ATTEMPT TO
INFLUENCE 2010 ELECTIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The FARC released four "political hostages," including three police and one soldier, on February 1 to Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba and the ICRC. Brazil provided logistical support, including two helicopters. The FARC's last two civilian "political" hostages--former Meta Governor Alan Jara and former Valle de Cauca Assemblyman Sigifredo Lopez--are to be freed in coming days. Peace Commissioner Restrepo told us the FARC's decision to free the six men is an effort to strengthen Cordoba's "peace camp," relieve the military pressure on the group, and undercut the GOC's democratic security policy ahead of the 2010 presidential elections. He expects Cordoba to use the releases to press the GOC into humanitarian accord talks. Restrepo said the GOC would accept peace talks if the FARC freed hostages and halted violence, but added that the moment for a humanitarian accord has passed. He said Uribe opposed an international role in FARC talks beyond logistical help. End summary.

FARC RELEASES FOUR HOSTAGES TO ICRC

2. (U) The FARC released four hostages on February 1 to representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and three members of "Colombians for Peace" group, including Senator Piedad Cordoba. The four men freed, three Police and one soldier, were part of the FARC's group of "political hostages." The FARC took the four men--Walter Lozano, Juan Galicia, Alexis Torres, and William Giovanni--hostage in separate incidents in 2007. Brazil provided logistical support for the recovery operation, including two Cougar helicopters and crews which operated under ICRC markings. The men were recovered near Cartagena de Chaira, Cauca Department. Twenty-one political hostages, all members of the police and military, will remain in FARC custody once Jara and Lopez are released.

TWO MORE (POSSIBLY) TO FOLLOW

3. (U) Former Meta Governor Alan Jara and former Valle de Cauca State Assemblyman Sigifredo Lopez are set to be released in coming days, though the GOC announced it would allow only the Brazilians, ICRC, and Cordoba to participate in those releases. President Uribe met with the four freed hostages at Narino Palace on February 2, and used a midnight press conference with the men to slam the FARC for a bombing

in Cali that killed two on February 2. At that time, Uribe also said he would not authorize Cordoba or journalist and Colombians for Peace member Jorge Enrique Botero to participate in additional releases. Botero called Venezuelan-run media outlet Telesur during the operation and claimed that the GOC had continued military operations during the operation in an effort to torpedo the release.

4 (U) The Casa de Narino and Restrepo sharply rejected Botero's claims, but the GOC issued a communique later on February 2 authorizing Cordoba's renewed participation based upon an ICRC request. The ICRC announced that the mission to recover Jara, previously planned for February 2, would likely be delayed to coordinate with the GOC on security.

FARC'S REAL INTENTION: INFLUENCE ELECTIONS

15. (C) Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo told us on January 28 that the GOC anticipated that the FARC would attempt to raise Cordoba's profile ahead of the 2010 presidential elections to strengthen the hand of the "peace camp," relieve GOC military pressure on the group, and undercut Uribe's democratic security policy. Restrepo said FARC leader Alfonso Cano and Secretariat member Pablo Catatumbo continued to rebuff efforts by the GOC authorized messenger Henry Acosta to meet with them. The GOC has seen no sign the FARC wants to engage in serious peace talks. Restrepo said the GOC has been engaged in this same tactical battle with the FARC for six years; this time at least, six hostages, including the last two civilians, would be freed.

16. (C) Restrepo said Cordoba has made it clear that her next

step would be an attempt at talks leading to a "humanitarian accord" and a possible peace process. The GOC believes the political moment for a humanitarian accord has passed, and believes the FARC wants to use humanitarian accord talks to obtain "belligerent status." He said the GOC plans to respond by urging the FARC to enter into peace talks conditioned on: 1) the FARC's unilateral release of all hostages, and 2) a FARC commitment (still undefined) to halt violence. The GOC recognizes that it will face domestic pressure to pursue humanitarian talks, but believes it can withstand the demands. Restrepo added that the GOC is not interested in talking peace with the FARC while the war continues.

17. (C) Presidential Communications Director Jorge Mario Eastman told us the GOC found it easier to manage the current hostage release process promoted by Cordoba than it did the earlier process with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. He said that neither Cordoba nor the FARC insisted on conditions that the GOC could not accept. Still, he expects the release to be a one-off event which will not lead to a humanitarian accord or a broader peace process, noting that the increasing focus on the 2010 presidential election would make the already bleak prospects for progress on peace even smaller.

NO INTERNATIONAL ROLE IN FARC TALKS

18. (C) Restrepo said Uribe remained opposed to any international role in talks with the FARC. The GOC rebuffed Cordoba's initial suggestion that Venezuela handle the logistics of the current round of hostage releases. The GOC accepted Brazilian participation because the Brazilians made clear they would only play a logistical, as opposed to political, role. Restrepo said that neither the FARC nor Cordoba pushed aggressively for an international guarantor in the process. It was other members of Cordoba's group, including Botero, that pushed for the Brazilians or U.S. Congressmen McGovern to participate in a guarantor or witness role. Restrepo said the GOC believes that the FARC sees no interest in having Venezuela or Ecuador play a high-profile role at this time, preferring instead to develop its clandestine political ties in both countries.

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